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Workers' aid center open today

By Holly Edwards
Staff Writer
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Thousands of low-income residents throughout the San Fernando Valley face exploitation in the workplace -- overtime without pay, long hours without breaks, earnings below the minimum wage.

Now, those workers may be able to recover what they are owed through the Workers' Rights Self-Help Center, which opens at 9 a.m. today at Mission College in Sylmar.

Housed in the college's campus center, the workers' rights center will be staffed by volunteers -- college students and attorneys from Neighborhood Legal Services, a nonprofit organization that provides legal help to the poor. It will be open every Saturday morning.

Those involved with the effort say the center will help workers to learn how to stand up for their rights and students to learn skills they can use in the workplace.

"A lot of times education is done in a vacuum, but this will help students learn to deal with people who are upset, spot legal issues and learn to be empathetic and still do their job," said David Jordan, a law professor at Mission College.

"For the workers, the goal is self-empowerment through education, and they might also decide to sign up for a night course while they're here."

The workers' rights center is the second created by Neighborhood Legal Services. The other center has operated at Monroe High School in North Hills for two years and serves about 100 people each month, said Nancy Cervantes, an attorney for Neighborhood Legal Services.

The center is funded by a grant from the State Bar of California. It will provide brochures, form letters seeking back pay and other benefits, and help clients understand the law, but it will not provide legal representation, Cervantes said.

It will also help all low-income workers, regardless of their residency status.

"Immigration status is irrelevant," Cervantes said. "This a place where anyone can get legal information. It's open to all workers who have employment problems."

Cervantes said workplace abuses are widespread and occur primarily in the garment, construction, restaurant and domestic services businesses.

In one case she is now reviewing, she said two men who were cousins worked for the same construction business and put in thousands of hours of unpaid labor. One man is owed \$70,000, while the other is owed \$20,000, she said.

"The most important thing is to keep track of all the hours you work, especially if the employer doesn't provide that information," she said. "You don't have to have a lawyer, but you have to know your rights."

Many of those exploited in the workplace are undocumented residents who believe they have no rights, while others are threatened with termination if they complain, she said.

Cervantes added that undocumented laborers have the same rights as anyone else in the workplace, except they can't file for unemployment benefits if fired.

"If undocumented workers didn't have rights, it would amount to slavery," Cervantes said. "Most employers don't exploit their workers, but there are some employers who really do take advantage of their workers, and immigrants are more vulnerable to this abuse."

Edgar Villatoro, a 30-year-old father of two from Van Nuys, said he worked 100-hour weeks for a party supply business but was paid for only 40 hours. With Cervantes' help, he said he wrote his employer a letter demanding the money, provided an account of the hours he worked, and just received two checks totaling more than \$3,000.

"A lot of times I worked Sunday to Sunday," Villatoro said. "But when I asked my boss about the overtime, he told me I could walk out the door anytime."

Cervantes said this is exactly the type of exploitation that can be prevented through education.

"We're helping them to help themselves by knowing their rights," she said.